

RESULTS ACCOUNTABILITY FOR A STATE EARLY CHILDHOOD COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM: A Planning Guide for Improving the Well-Being of Young Children and Their Families

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Overview

To ensure that all young children enter school in good health, ready and able to learn, and are socially and emotionally well developed, states are challenged by the State Early Childhood Comprehensive System (SECCS) Initiative to assure that services are coordinated, integrated and well managed. States must not only plan the delivery of services, but also improve the performance of the service delivery system. Eventually, all states will be called upon to answer the kinds of questions addressed in results-based decision making: "Are children and families better off? What difference did our work make?" This report guides the steps to be followed to achieve results-based accountability.

The Language of Accountability

Results and *indicators* are the ends we want for children and families. *Results* (or *outcomes*) are conditions of well-being for children, adults, families or communities. *Indicators* (or *benchmarks*) are measures that help quantify the achievement of a result. *Strategies* and *performance measures* are the means of achieving these outcomes. *Strategies* are coherent collections of actions which have a reasoned chance of improving results, and *performance measures* (or *performance indicators*) are measures of how well public and private programs, agencies, and service systems are working.

Responsibility: How to Help Assure that All Children Are Healthy and Ready for School

What do we want?

Population: The SECCS Initiative is about the well-being of all young children and their families.

Results: Results are conditions of well-being that the initiative aims to achieve.

How would we recognize it?

Experience: Determine what experiences and observations would reflect the desired results.

Indicators: Determine how to recognize these conditions in measurable terms.

Baselines: For each indicator, measure the initial or present conditions. Baselines can be used to measure improvements and success.

What will it take to get there?

Story behind the baselines: Gather additional information and research to explain the causes of the baseline picture.

Partners: Determine the potential partners and their roles in improving the baseline.

What works: Determine the strategies and services (including systems change) that would work to do better than the baseline.

Criteria: Determine criteria that guide the priority setting process during planning. Criteria include: specificity (the idea is about a specific action), leverage (figure out if the idea makes a large or small difference), values (the plan should be consistent with community values), and reach (the feasibility to implement the plan in the given time period).

Action plan and budget: Develop a multi-year plan for a timeline of accomplishments.



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How to Do This Work

Get people together.

- Create the state systems-building initiative as the nucleus of a larger set of partners.
- Get good staff and gather ideas from many others.

Choose results and indicators for young children and their families.

- Start by assessing experience.
- Develop a set of candidate indicators.
- Choose the best available indicators based on: *communication power* to be clear, *proxy power* to be of central importance, and *data power* to be reliable and consistent.
- Identify primary and secondary indicators, and a data development agenda.

Develop baselines and the story behind them.

- Baselines with forecasts allow us to ask and answer whether the future is acceptable. Baselines also assess progress in terms of doing better than the baseline.
- The story behind baselines requires involvement of many partners from different and diverse communities. Creating a periodic report card and determining the cost of bad results helps to update and redefine the story.

Consider what works.

- Look at the research on early childhood services and systems, but don't be limited by research.
- Consider what has worked in other places.
- Consider no-cost and low-cost ideas.

Craft what ideas work into a coherent strategy.

- Assess your ideas against the four criteria (specificity, leverage, values, reach).
- Fit the pieces together to create a system. Determine opportunities to break down walls between service systems and lessen duplication and bureaucracy.
- Fund the plan. As a priority, first fund no-cost or low-cost items. Then fund items using collaborating partners rather than SECCS dollars. Next, include items funded jointly with SECCS and other funds. Finally, include items funded only with SECCS dollars.

Work with your partners to implement that strategy.

- Develop a simple action plan that outlines each partner's role and their tasks to be completed.

Use performance accountability to assure service quality.

- How much did we do? (Quantity X Effort)
- How well did we do it? (Quality X Effort)
- Is anyone better off? (Quantity X Effect)
- Is anyone better off? (Quality X Effect)

"Is anyone better off?" is the most important measure, followed by "How well did we do it?"

Don't accept lack of control as an excuse.

- Accept that we must use measures we do not completely control.

Create a performance accountability system useful to managers.

Performance measurement and accountability operates at various levels. The same thinking process is used at higher levels of accountability:

- Who are our customers?
- How could we measure if our customers are better off?
- How could we measure if we're delivering service well?
- How are we doing on the most important measures?
- Who are the partners who play a role in doing better?
- What works to do better?
- And what do we propose to do?

Repeat the above process to track progress.

Conclusion

States can improve results by considering where they are now and where they want to be in the future. The SECCS Initiative presents opportunities to join various partners and service providers together to design an action plan and to develop performance measures that assess an early childhood system. Results-based accountability can also guide strategic planning and funding allocation, as well as track improvements through measurement of outcomes.

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